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ABSTRACT

The case study method has received increased attention at both the graduate and undergraduate levels in a number of public relations programs. Unlike the Harvard managerial-oriented case studies, the approach useful in large, introductory public relations courses stems from a simplified team approach to classroom projects, case studies in the classroom, and small groups advocated by various educators. An instructor at Florida International University finds the following to be effective ways to make "team cases" useful in the introductory public relations course: begin with theoretical underpinnings; encourage students to became familiar with all the cases in the textbook; introduce the team concept in the third week; supply ancillary materials to the teams; keep teams to four-to-seven participants; have teams meet back in the classroom at a specified time with their answers/solutions to the cases; and emphasize the public relations process rather than getting the "right" answer. Benefits of the course include: (1) socialization skills are honed; (2) students become more autonomous as learners; (3) a better environment is created for the teacher; (4) students learn to research and present more indepth information than they do working alone; and (5) students enjoy the team cases more than any other part of the course. Team casework can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, a goal toward which all public relations educators should strive. (Contains 36 notes and 22 references.) (RS)

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ED 367 025

USING CASE STUDIES IN THE INTRODUCTORY PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSE

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During the past ten years, much has been written in scholarly journals and the popular press alike about how educational institutions can improve teaching and learning through everything from introduction of new creative methodology, computerization of classroom activities and interactive video to simply improving environmental conditions for students and instructors. This paper concentrates on a teaching and learning concept receiving increased attention at both the graduate and undergraduate levels in a number of public relations programs: the case study method.

First, we'll offer some definitions of "case study," and how it's used in this discussion; examine how case studies can be valuable learning tools in the large-class setting; look at advantages and disadvantages of the concept; give examples of situations from my introductory public relations course at Florida International University; and offer an evaluative look at results through comparisons with subject literature, plus student comments about case study participation.

Definitions

It should be made clear at the outset that in discussing the use of "case studies" in the large undergraduate introductory public relations class, we will <u>not</u> be using the term in the "traditional" Harvard Case Study Method sense.

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Begun in the early part of the twentieth century, the Harvard managerial-oriented case studies have evolved into prestigious exercises often involving semester or year-long examinations of organizations through detailed analysis of culture, structure, product introduction and suspension, crises and the like.(1)

What we'll examine here includes derivations of a simplified "team approach to classroom projects" outlined by Jolliffe (2), the "case studies in the classroom" described by Kruckeberg (3), and the "small groups" examples offered by McElreath.(4)

As Wakefield has noted, terminology surrounding "case studies" tends to be confusing, running the gamut from simply "case," to "case history," "case analysis," "case problem," and the familiar "case study."(5) For the purposes of this discussion, we'll use the invented term, "team cases," as applied to the structure and methodology used in my intro course. (For the most part, cases are taken from the Seitel text, but often augmented with outside readings and handouts amplifying the individual case.) (6)

I've presented an overview of this "team case" concept, discussing it anecdotally within the large-class structure, while also citing other educators' experiences as well as student evaluations of the exercises.

Discussion

Outside of the obvious benefit to the teacher of having less papers to grade (intro course class sizes have ranged from 45 to 60 during the past three years at FIU), why teach variations of the case study method to introductory public relations students?

"Education," Jolliffe writes, "has come late to the idea of working in teams." There is more pressure for individual achievement in the classroom, while industry has a long-standing relationship with the team concept in theory and practice.(7)

Reasons to encourage more emphasis on "team participation" cited by a number of scholars include benefits derived from the "socialization" of group interaction(8); alleviation of what McElreath calls the "Atlas Complex" (the teacher tries to do it all, risking ineffectiveness and burnout) (9); and the opportunity for students to face group-related problems they'll encounter when entering the field.(10) Additionally, Newsom, Scott and VanSlyke Turk say "cases serve as idea resources for public relations practitioners in solving problems and for public relations scholars in theory-building."(11)

And, writes Jolliffe, "through class discussions of the situations and people in the cases, students will hone their insights, perceptions, thought processes and interpersonal skills...."(12)

While student evaluations and responses to questions asking "likes and dislikes" might not provide a reliable framework on which to build course methods and direction, nonetheless my in-class research has shown a definite preference for "teamwork" and "case studies" over any other aspects of the intro course.(13)

So while it seems there are numerous advantages to at least a <u>form</u> of case study method as a public relations teaching tool (especially in environments where large-class teachers have no

break-out "lab" sessions or help from graduate assistants), what potential dangers should one be aware of when embarking upon the use of case studies or "team projects"?

Kruckeberg, among others, has offered counsel about case studies, citing a number of educators critical of the method, especially as an entire course framework (14) (something not applicable to my Principles of Public Relations, the FIU intro course, wherein the "team cases" are only a portion of the semester work).(15)

In using case studies on the classroom, Kruckeberg says we must watch "hypothetical resolutions supported by little or no theory...," and adds that a poorly-taught case study method can be detrimental to public relations theory-building.(16)

Echoing these cautionary words, Broom writes that before being asked to analyze cases, students need a "conceptual framework,"(17) or at least a "process of analysis," suggested by Wilson.(18)

Hendrix thinks teachers should be alert to underlying "process" concepts for working with cases, citing his ROPE model (a variation of Marston's more-familiar RACE), and saying the case study method makes for "interactive public relations" as opposed to "traditional" one-way teaching models.(19) (And there are those educators such as Laurie Grunig and Jim Grunig who firmly believe theory should be the basis for any public relations course. Cases, Laurie Grunig has noted, should be used as illustrations of research-based theory.(20))

Cautions and benefits aside, it's obvious some form of the case study method continues to be taught in most public relations sequences, including the intro course.(21) As Russell has written, "our job is to create an environment for a full cycle of learning to take place (including) case studies."(22)

Keeping observed benefits and cautionary messages in mind then, what are some of the steps teachers can take to ensure successful and meaningful case study projects if they choose to implement the method in the intro course?

Drawing from my own experiences, while noting research conducted by several scholars, following are some ways I've tried to make "team cases" effective intro course learning tools during the past three years at FIU:

* I begin with the theoretical underpinnings of public relations practice, including early exposure to the need for research and process in the field. "Cases" don't begin until the third week of classes.(23)

* Students are encouraged to read ahead in the text and become familiar with <u>all</u> cases cited in assigned chapter(s) before coming to class, as well as those in selected handouts, plus be ready to discuss "cases" currently in the news (Miami's problem with crime and its resulting impact on tourism, for example).

* By the third week, the "team" concept is explained and the first groups are self-formed (usually is the last hour of our two-hour-forty-minute once-weekly class). "Public relations directors" for that week's case(s) are named (generally,

alphabetically), guidelines for answering questions for the case are stated, team sign-up sheets are handed out, and the teams are given a time-limit to complete the assignment.(24)

* While cases usually come from the Seitel text, ancillary materials are supplied to teams by me from other sources for amplification (especially of some of the more sophisticated cases, such as the Dalkon Shield IUD controversy, the Corona beer "tampering" case, etc.), and students may bring in any research they've done in advance to help complete the assignment (few do). (25)

* Teams are kept to 4-7 participants, if possible. Although I encourage students to seek different teammates each week, they tend to gravitate to familiar peers and form cliques--although some attempt to find the perceived "brains" of the class and stick to that person's team. As a "group process facilitator." I tend to let them choose with whom they want to work, which offers advantages and disadvantages.(26) I've found the former outweighs the latter, allowing "self-selection of roles."(27)

(Besides, along with telling me on the "optional evaluation form" at the end of the semester that teamwork is their "favorite" part of the course, students also say they prefer to choose their own teams. The intro course may not exactly illustrate democracy in action, but I'm nothing if not symmetrical in my teaching. Students may not always know what's best for them, but they know what they <u>enjoy</u>--and it's not the lectures.(28)

* Depending upon the individual case and the time left for the assignment (because of guest speakers, discussion of past assignments, videos, lectures, test results, etc.), teams are asked to meet back in the classroom at a specified time, with their answers/solutions to the cases. "Public relations directors" are responsible for shepherding the group, writing observations about participants (and non-participants--a form of "peer review"), asking me any final questions and handing in the assignment <u>on time</u> (as in "real life" situations).

In those cases where teams are to be back in class before the end of the period, I wander among them ("management by walking around"), catching up to them in the student cafeteria, library, hallways, along the bay (sorry), the original classroom or wherever they go to get comfortable and work on the problem. When the assignment is a "take-home" due the following week, they're on their own.

The latter scenario is sometimes fraught with problems stemming from the probability that most teams will try to finish the assignment <u>before</u> going home after class, so they don't have to meet "on their own time" prior to our next class session (as a largely "commuter school," distances in South Florida do make this an understandable hardship at times). The non-supervised "take-home" papers are generally the most hurried, hence the most poorly-structured and non-participatory ("so-and-so never showed up to work on the project," or someone would rather do the project solo than meet up with a team between classes).

Grades are meted out with as much of an eye toward participation as on process and answers themselves. Students eventually learn the more time and effort put into the case, the happier I'll be (and the more they'll learn about the case and their own capabilities, along with appreciating group dynamics for future professional assignments; e.g., how difficult is it to write a coherent news release with five other people?).

Weekly cases count for about one-quarter of their semester grade; the overall team grade is the participants' grade for the assignment.

* While there are no universal "ground rules" for answering the questions--or even "right" answers for everything (not even the Exxon Valdez case seems to elicit complete agreement)--students are expected to show public relations "process" in their work, relating answers to what they've learned in lectures, from guest speakers, in text chapters and handouts and in suggested/assigned outside readings. Strictly anecdotal answers are not encouraged.

Benefits of Intro Course "Team Cases"

A general overview of small group/case study advantages and disadvantages have been noted; below are the perceived benefits the "team study" method has brought to my intro course (in no rank order):

1. Socialization skills are honed. Jolliffe has shown that "carefully-managed" team projects can help students "mediate among themselves to pressure for higher performance standards

(including) self-esteem, interaction...and sense of personal freedom."(29) This obviously can be advantageous later in the professional work environment.

2. Students become more autonomous as learners, a finding of Abercrombie and Terry's 1978 research (30) and backed up by Slavin's 1983 study, showing "group assignments do lead to increased learning...."(31) Even the popular press gets into the act, with a 1993 U.S. News & World Report article lauding classroom teamwork, playing up the advantage of "group interaction."(32)

3. A better environment for the teacher, alleviating--as noted above--much of the workload that would occur if one were to call for 45-60 papers apiece each week in the intro class, as opposed to the 7-8 weekly papers generated by the teams.

4. Students learn to research and present more in-depth information than they normally would working alone. While I've based this on anecdotal observation, the large intro class obviously offers limitations to much weekly individual research--unless the teacher has no life at all.

5. Students enjoy the team cases more than any other part of the intro course, according to non-prompted questions on the "optional evaluations," as noted above.(33) This is a good thing--so long as the structure follows guidelines discussed above, precautions are taken to ensure "quality management," and both limitations and benefits are understood and anticipated.

Thus, while the large intro class may be antithesis to the ideal one-on-one educator/student relationship ("the wise one imparting knowledge to the novice,"(34); the mentor and his or her neophyte), the case study method can be an important, versatile vehicle for the teacher to guide learning as a "group process facilitator," especially for those students who are "curious...socially active individuals...."(35)

And finally, team casework can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, a goal toward which all public relations educators should strive.(36) ##

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Notes

1. Newsom, Scott, VanSlyke Turk. This is PR (5th ed.). Wadsworth, 1992, p. 508; Fortune magazine, April 5, 1993

2. Jolliffe, Lee B. "Industry's Team Approach to Classroom Projects," Journalism Educator, Summer 1991 (46/2, pp. 15-24)

3. Kruckeberg, Dean. "Using Case Studies in the Classroom," Learning to Teach. (ed. by VanSlyke Turk, 1991 PRSA), pp. 221-233

4. McElreath, Mark P. "Using Small Groups in the Classroom," Learning to Teach, pp. 207-220

5. Wakefield, Gay. Quoted in Kruckeberg, op. cit., p. 225

6. Seitel, Fraser P. The Practice of Public Relations (5th ed.), Macmillan, New York 1992.

7. Jolliffe, op. cit., p. 16

8. Ibid.

9. McElreath, op. cit., p. 207

10. Ibid.

11. Newsom, Scott, VanSlyke Turk, op. cit., p. 507

12. Jolliffe, op. cit., p. 17

13. See sampling of "optional evaluation" sheets in possession of the writer. Surveys are handed out at end of semester, along with "traditional" departmental evaluations. No names are required and students are asked open-ended, short-answer questions about the course, the book and the instructor.

14. Kruckeberg, op. cit., pp. 227-230

15. Syllabus for past three years of Principles of Public Relations (PUR 3000) available from writer.

16. Kruckeberg, op. cit., p. 221

17. Broom, Glen M., cited in Kruckeberg, op. cit., p. 227

18. Wilson, Lauri J., cited in Kruckeberg, op. cit., p. 223

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19. Hendrix, Jerry. Public Relations Cases (2nd ed.), Wadsworth, Belmont, CA, 1992

20. Grunig, Lauri, cited in Kruckeberg, op. cit., p. 222

21. See Jolliffe, Kruckeberg, McElreath references for numerous citations of works about case studies, small-group teaching, etc.

22. Russell, Maria. "Developing Challenging and Creative Assignments." Learning to Teach, op. cit., p. 100

23. PUR 3000 syllabi, op. cit.

24. Team sign-up forms and instructions available from writer

25. Seitel text, op. cit.; sample supportive materials available from writer

26. See, for example, McElreath, op. cit., esp. p. 212

27. Ibid.

28. Optional evaluation forms, op. cit.

29. Jolliffe, op. cit., p. 18

30. Abercrombie, M.L.J. and P.M. Terry. "Talking to Learn: Improving Teaching and Learning in Small Groups." Society for Research into Higher Education. Guilford, Surry, England (1978)

31. Slavin, Robert E. Cooperative Learning. New York, Longman (1983), esp. p. 44

32. US News & World Report, March 22, 1993

33. Optional evaluation forms, op. cit.

34. McElreath, op. cit., p. 207

35. Ibid., p. 208

36. See, for example, Adams, William C., "Survey Reveals Dichotomies in Educator-Practitioner Relationship," AEJMC PR Update, Fall, 1993; expanded work in print, Public Relations Quarterly, Winter, 1993; several references to need for improving this relationship in AEJMC publications, 1992-93, including panel presentation at AEJMC annual meeting, Kansas City, 1992 (writer is "Professional Liaison" chair for AEJMC)

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